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HEEL-GOOD PERFORMANCE

Your ankles and heels are your first point of contact between you and the ground, making them a pivotal area for your sports performance. Here's how to ensure they stay injury free and primed for winning on every pitch



YOUR PHYSICIAN
DR EUGENE A BATELLI



Foot and ankle surgeon specializing in treating high-end athletes, like marathon winners and NFL players. Visit: metroankle.com



You don't have to be an accomplished athlete to suffer ankle and Achilles tendon injuries. They can happen from mundane household tasks like climbing a ladder or tripping down a step.

Achilles tendon weakness is common in adults, but seeking treatment when very slight and almost unnoticeable symptoms occur could prevent more serious injury.

Achilles tendonitis is common for anyone whose work routinely puts stress on the feet and ankles. It can also be caused by not warming up before working out, or a burst of more intense activity during a sweat session, like sprinting towards the finish line, or even wearing the wrong kind of shoes for the activity you're doing.

Sadly, Achilles tendon injuries happen most often to less conditioned 'weekend warrior' athletes who overdo it. However, I've also had patients who've ruptured the tendon simply by climbing a ladder quickly. Middle-aged men are more prone to this type of injury, most likely because they tend to push themselves beyond their limits.

The major causes of Achilles tendon injuries involve jumping and running. In sports like basketball and tennis, muscles and tendons in the back of the leg are prone to injury from an imbalance that occurs from a lot of forward motion. As a result, the frontal imbalance can weaken the tendon unless stretching exercises are performed regularly.

The Achilles tendon is the tendon that connects the lower leg muscles and calf to the heel of your foot. It is the longest and strongest tendon in the body and therefore subjected to considerable wear and tear.

Also, the Achilles tendon is essential for making movement possible. When it becomes inflamed from overuse or sudden stress, tendonitis can weaken it over time and cause microscopic tears. People risk further deterioration and possible rupture when they don't seek medical care for these injuries.

The main symptoms of Achilles tendonitis are pain, stiffness and tenderness. Pain occurs in the morning, improves with motion but gets worse with increasing stress and activity. The tendon may feel sore where it meets the heel, your lower leg may feel stiff, or you may feel pain in the back of your leg after your workout or sport.

Fortunately, there are a huge amount of options that can help keep it in tip-top nick so your performance keeps kicking goals. ❦



+ Make sure your sports performance always gets out the blocks fast by protecting your Achilles

STAYING COURTSIDE

So, what can be done to minimize the risk of Achilles tendonitis? Use variety in your workout and limit the amount of stairs and hill running you do. Stretch, and be sure to gradually increase intensity during your workout.

Wear the correct shoes with good arch support and replace them when they are worn out. Always use good technique and use a spotter. Squatting 405lb and blowing out your Achilles really isn't worth the bragging rights.

When injuries do occur, it's best to see a specialist sooner rather than later. Often athletes wait too long and, unfortunately, the injury worsens. Hopefully the suggestions on these pages will help you put your best foot forward so you can always perform at your peak.



GET BACK IN THE GAME

Hike up your recovery rate using the following tactics that will get your lower body primed for improved game day performance

HOME REMEDY

For minor pain and discomfort you should use gel or ice packs for 20 minutes, three times a day. At the 20-minute mark, the capillaries dilate and blood starts rushing into the area.

Another option is an ice massage with a styrofoam cup filled with ice. Peel off the bottom and then rub the ice directly onto the affected spot for five minutes. By comparison, five minutes of ice massage equals 20 minutes of basic icing.

In addition to bringing in blood flow, icing cools down the pain messages that stressed tissue sends to the brain. The tissue gets cold and the swelling recesses. It's never anyone's favorite form of treatment but it's highly effective.

THE MEDICATION ROUTE

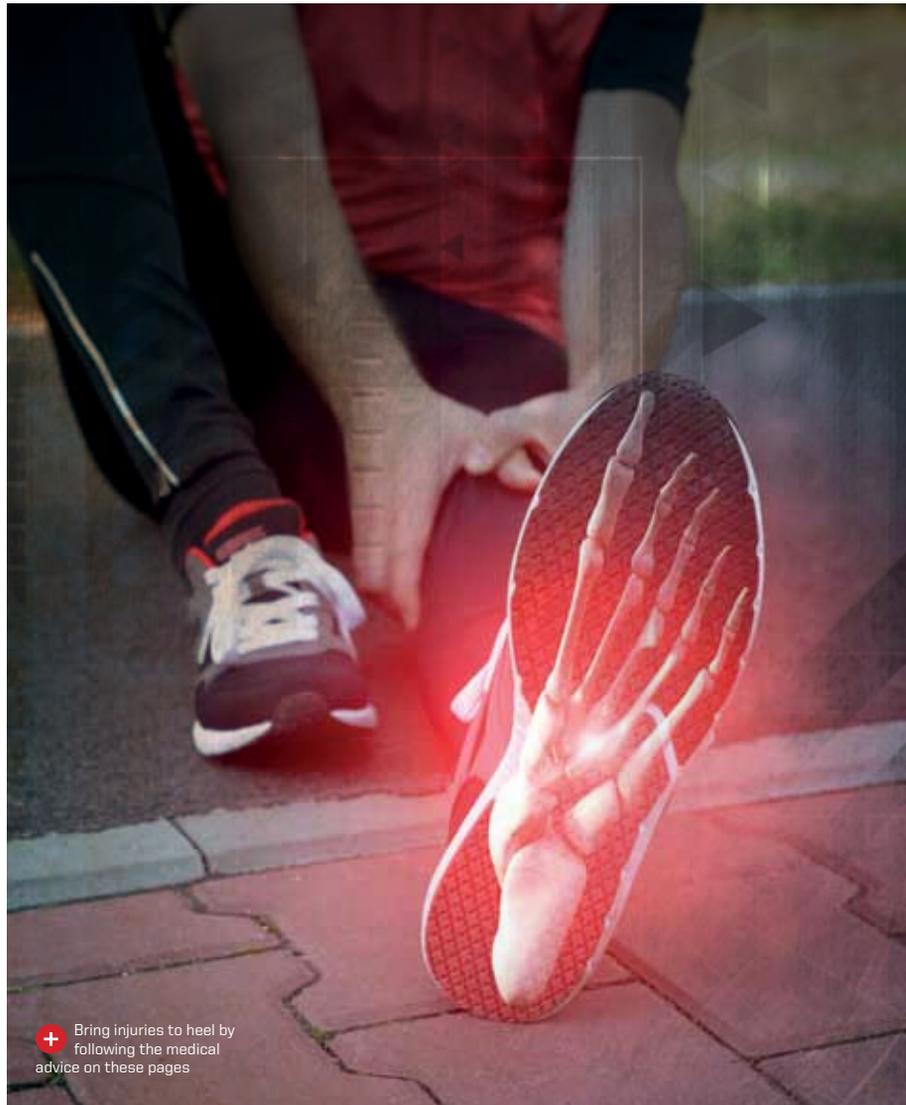
If icing doesn't deliver relief, non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication may be the next step to reduce pain and inflammation. Alternatives to drug therapy include vitamin and mineral supplements like arnica (cream or tablets), curcumin and turmeric, which all have powerful natural anti-inflammatory properties.

GET PHYSICAL

If weakness and discomfort persist, your specialist may suggest physical therapy to strengthen and stretch the tendon. While you cannot actually stretch a tendon, stretching will lengthen the gastrocnemius muscle fibrils so the overall pull on the tendon is reduced. It is important to stretch before exercise to warm up the muscles for the extreme stress they are about to be put under.

BEST FOOT FORWARD

When pain remains chronic, you may need to have your feet checked for weaknesses. Orthotics help correct any biomechanical abnormalities you might have, like flat feet and pronation (feet that roll inward). Corrective orthotics allow the tendon to pull in a straighter line and reduce the added tension on the tendon.



Bring injuries to heel by following the medical advice on these pages

IT'S SHOCKING

A great and highly effective non-surgical option is extra-corporeal shockwave therapy (ESWT). It's basically a high-intensity ultrasound that breaks up the inflammatory cells and stimulates blood flow to the area to increase healing. It's not comfortable but this treatment works.

I have been using this technology since 2005 and have had nothing but fantastic results with it. The amount of chronic tendonitis I operate on has substantially reduced with the incorporation of ESWT to my treatment plan.

REST OF THE CAST

Your specialist may suggest wearing a cast to immobilize the Achilles tendon and promote healing. This allows the hot spots to cool down and the tendon to heal slowly. It does

take you out of the game and out of the gym, but for severe cases this treatment may be the best option. Sometimes rest really is the best medicine.

UNDER THE KNIFE

If all other approaches fail, surgery may be needed to restore the tendon to its normal condition. Recovery from surgery could take anywhere from three weeks to three months depending on what needs to be fixed. Surgery is geared towards correcting the biomechanical problem(s) that caused the tendonitis as well as fixing the damaged tendon.

The most common surgeries include removal of bone spurs in the tendon (retrocalcaneal bone spurs), correcting a flat foot and lengthening the tendon if severely tight. Obviously, surgery is always the last resort. ●